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PRESERVATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND TRADITION THROUGH TOURISM: A STUDY ON MAH MERI COMMUNITY IN CAREY ISLAND, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

To support sustainable tourism practices in the Malaysian tourism context, this study is regarded as an exploratory study that focuses on the development of cultural tourism in the Mah Meri Community, which includes both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The focus is on the identity, preservation of the cultural heritage, and promotion of cultural products of the Mah Meri Community, a local Orang Asli community on Carey Island in Selangor, Malaysia. The research's overarching goal is to investigate the factors in the preservation of the cultural features of the Mah Meri Community as a tourism product that can help in promoting the destinations to other people from different backgrounds, races, destinations, and customs. The qualitative data collection helped the researcher to holistically understand the community's cultural identity, characteristics, and resources in the form of cultural tourism products. However, the local community believes that their identity as a potential tourist draw is increasingly threatened due to a lack of natural resources and the government's attention.

Keywords: Indigenous people, Mah Meri Community, preservation, cultural heritage, identity

INTRODUCTION

The indigenous community in Malaysia represents around 12% of the Malaysian population, and most of them reside in East Malaysia while the remaining are residing in Peninsular Malaysia. The indigenous community in Peninsular Malaysia are relatively small, representing only 0.5% (178,000) of the entire population of Malaysia. They can be categorized into three groups namely 1) Semang (Negrito), 2) Senoi and 3) Proto Malay (Aboriginal Malay). Each group has a different language, beliefs, living style, culture and ethnic. The geographical location also differentiates the indigenous people. For instance, those who reside near the coastal area are fishermen while those residing away from the coastal area are mainly farmers. [1,2,3]

Indigenous communities have rich culture and arts especially their wood carving. In general, indigenous communities are poor and it is one of the biggest challenges for the government to assist them. The study's goal is to disclose how to create a preservation strategy for threatened cultures, especially for Indigenous cultures that may soon disappear from the world. [4,5]

Mah Meri Community and Tourism

Orang Asli is classified into three major groups: the Negrito, the Senoi, and the Proto Malay, who differ in language, lifestyle, homes, facial traits, and skin colour. The Negrito tribes include Kensu, Kintak, Jahai, Mendriq, Bateq, and Lanah. The tribes of Senoi are Temlar, Semai, Semoq Beri, Che Wong, Jah Hut, and Mah Meri. Temuan, Semelai, Jakun, Orang Kanaq, Orang Kuala, and Orang Seletar are the Proto Malay tribes. They are one of the Malaysian government's 18 Orang Asli groups. They belong to the Senoi subgroup.

The Mah Meri tribe is mostly concentrated along the coast of South Selangor, from Sungai Pelek to Pulau Carey. There is at least one Mah Meri community on the opposite side of the Klang River. Their forefathers are said to be linked with the entrance of Austro-Asian migrants involved with the introduction of fire-cutting agriculture and rice on the Malay Peninsula. Some Mah Meri and Senoi have intermarried with local Negrito tribes as a result of cultural interactions and trade. Most of the Mah Meri resides in tiny villages (kampungs) on the outskirts of neighbouring towns and on Pulau Carey, which contains five independent Mah Meri communities. [6,7,8]

Pulau Carey is in the Malaysian state of Selangor. The place is well-known for its two distinct features. The first is a thriving fish sector, and the second is an indigenous group known as the Mah Meri people, who are renowned for producing some of the world's best wooden masks in terms of cultural value. They are originally known as the Besisi, which means people with fish scales. The Mah Meri community/people is an ethnic group from Peninsular Malaysia's western region.

As time passes, the Mah Meri people become a tourist attraction for others. More and more tourists are flocking there to experience their way of life and learn more about the culture of Pulau Carey. Mah Meri is a highly prominent race in Malaysia; they represent a type of Malaysian culture, particularly in terms of Orang Asli (indigenous people). Many researchers and authors travel to Pulau Carey to experience and study their way of life. Even though Pulau Carey is not as well-known as Redang and Tioman Islands, Mah Meri's culture has aided the growth of cultural tourism on the island. Because of their mastery of traditional wood carving, the Mah Meri people of Pulau Carey are highly renowned across the world. They have now integrated into contemporary life while simultaneously working in adjacent plantations and farms. They do, however, preserve their distinct culture and way of life.

Culture Heritage

Cultural heritage encompasses tangible and intangible assets passed down from one generation to another within a group or community. It includes tangible culture, intangible culture, and natural heritage. The Mah Meri tribe, for example, is known for their arts, language, tradition, ritual, and dance. Handicrafts, such as leaf origami, masks, and sculptures, are an important aspect of the global visitor experience. The Jah Hut and Mah Meri tribes are known for their figure and mask carvings, which showcase their artistic and abstract creativity. These sculptures reflect their life and are often used in ceremonial dances to worship their ancestors' spirits, known as "Moyang." The carvings are influenced by their spiritual beliefs and are often sold to foreigners and collectors. The Mah Meri people also use ancestor spirits to cure issues and fight against evil spirits. These carvings are recognized by UNESCO as part of the world's heritage and are sought after by international collectors. [9]

Mah Meri, a Malay Peninsula Austroasiatic language, is a member of the Southern Aslian branch of the Aslian languages. It is a language spoken by 3,675 speakers in a coastal setting on the shores of Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. Mah Meri is a forest dweller group with tribes and a language like Proto-Malay. The language has 30 consonants and 9 vowels, with two voice registers: register 1 with shorter durations, a clearer voice, and a lower pitch, and register 2 with looser, longer, and higher pitched vowels. However, the language is not written.[10]

The Mah Meri group has a unique method of healing disease through ritual, which is divided into four stages: *sembuang* ritual, *ancak*, *balai*, and *sampan*. The first stage involves a bamboo tray placed at the patient's foot, containing everyday necessities such as candles, rice, turmeric, coal, egg, betel leaf, area nut, sugar, and salt. The shaman burns incense, sings incantations, and spreads 'pengebas' on the patient's body to remove the diseases from within the body and transfer them to the *sembuang*.; A 15 cm diameter *Ancak*, is stocked with everyday essentials and three *pulai* wood sculptures, *Moyang Subay*, *Moyang Jegus*, and *Moyang Langkay*, who act as the "Guardian of Sickness." The *Ancak* is then hanged from the tree where the patient is believed to have received the sickness.

Community participation is an essential feature of the Mah Meri culture, with members working together to construct dwellings using traditional materials and methods. The Mah Meri has a long history of singing, dance, and storytelling, which are transmitted through rituals and environmental conservation initiatives. The community has recognized the importance of preserving their artistic and performance traditions to increase national significance and gain government respect.

Preserving architectural legacy can reduce reliance on new materials for construction projects and reduce the energy used in production. This, in turn, generates jobs and economic growth for citizens. Preservation and restoration also generate skilled occupations, raising the value of surrounding properties and promoting community growth.

Intangible cultural assets, such as performance and craft, are passed down orally from generation to generation. The production of authentic traditional arts and crafts supports the indigenous people's economic and cultural vitality. To prevent imitation, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) recommends the introduction of domestic legislation.

Historic preservation is a residential development that preserves the beauty and worth of existing land. These buildings serve as architectural histories of who we are, reminding communities of our progress and providing significance for both the present and the future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The interview was held at Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island. A total of 155 people had been including villagers who live in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island. The Malay language was used. There were 2 categories of questions that had been asked. The first category was demographic. It includes gender, age, religion, marital status, family size, educational level, income level, and ownership. On the other hand, there were 3 categories that involve Cultural Programs and Initiatives for Section B. It includes Educational Programs, Culture- Art, Language, Ritual and Dance, Community Participation, Handicrafts, Mah Meri Cultural Village (MMCV) as well as the Sustainability of Indigenous Tourism. Challenges and Opportunities for Section C include Community Involvement, Government Policy, and Tourism Development. Preservation of Indigenous Culture and Tradition Through Tourism for Section D. The data had been analyzed using a program called. To respond to the research topic and evaluate the hypotheses, the researcher performed descriptive analysis, Cronbach alpha, and multiple linear regression. Researchers can generate descriptive statistics and do quantitative data analysis using SPSS. The demographics of the samples had been fully summarized using descriptive statistics. To quantify the internal consistency of a test or scale, the Cronbach alpha statistic had been utilized. The associations between the variables and the various constructs had been examined using multiple linear regression.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The Descriptive Analysis shows that tourism can attract many people to Mah Meri Cultural Village, affecting the preservation of indigenous culture and customs. The village has been preserving sculptures and masks since 1951, providing an example for young sculptors. Visitors, students, and government officials visit weekly to learn about the village's culture and traditions.

The study supports the hypothesis that sustainability in indigenous tourism impacts the preservation of indigenous culture and tradition. Respondents strongly agree that ancestral heritage must be preserved for tourism, aiming for a better future and preserving mental and physical health. Social sustainability involves equitably treating all people and providing essential services.

The Descriptive Analysis shows that community engagement significantly impacts indigenous culture and tradition preservation through tourism. The literature study supports this hypothesis, stating that the community acts as a symbolic key to sustainable tourism. Parents and elder generations continue to teach their children and grandchildren, preserving their culture and heritage

The study supports the hypothesis that government policy influences the preservation of indigenous culture and tradition through tourism. Most respondents agree that the tourism industry protects the Mah Meri community's natural environment. Malaysia's policy efforts, including the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010), promote tourism, craft sector growth, global market promotion, and heritage preservation, recognizing cultural, artistic, and heritage-related enterprises as economic expansion sources.

Tourism development in Mah Meri Community promotes positive environmental ethics, significantly impacting indigenous culture and customs. This growth benefits the community through cultural preservation, economic growth, and environmental protection. Fostering conservation efforts can conserve Mah Meri's natural resources and habitat.

DISCUSSION

Tourism development on Carey Island, Malaysia, presents both obstacles and possibilities for the Mah Meri people. Challenges include loss of cultural identity, environmental damage, and economic inequity. The Mah Meri culture is distinct and precious, but growing exposure to visitors and other influences may result in cultural uniformity and the loss of indigenous traditions and beliefs. Increased tourism may result in environmental deterioration, such as abuse of natural resources, pollution, and habitat damage.

On the bright side, tourist growth can provide opportunities for the community, such as cultural preservation, economic development, and environmental conservation. Cultural preservation can be achieved by promoting Mah Meri culture and traditional customs and fostering cultural preservation and education through introducing masks and carving art to other countries. Tourism can also be an income source for the Mah Meri community, contributing to economic growth and poverty alleviation. Environmental conservation can result in the protection of Mah Meri's natural resources and habitat by raising awareness of environmental concerns and promoting sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Enlightening visitors about the indigenous culture fosters solidarity and pride, allowing the Mah Meri people to retain their heritage through tourism. Tourism can be used to help preserve societies, cultures and natural environments by educating visitors to increase their awareness and appreciation for what makes a place special. In addition, tourism revenues, for example from entrance fee, donation and others, can be used to help finance preservation efforts.

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